

Pat Williams

Pat Williams, who served Montana as its U.S. Congressman for nine terms, from 1979-1997, is well known for his staunch advocacy to save the National Endowment for the Arts during the early 1990s, a full generation ago.

During his years in office, Williams was a member of the committees on Budget, Natural Resources, Education and Labor, and Agriculture. Within Education and Labor he chaired the committees on Post-secondary Education and Labor Management.

As a Deputy Whip of the U.S. House of Representatives, Williams had legislative process jurisdiction over bills affecting workplace legislation. During his tenure in office, he was also active on behalf of education, libraries, Native American tribal sovereignty, wilderness protection, environmental integrity for western states, and the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities.

When the National Endowment for the Arts came under attack for subsidizing what some legislators considered sexually explicit art, Williams led the fight to save the agency.

“As long as the federal government can support the arts without interfering with their content, government can indeed play a meaningful part in trying to encourage the arts,” Williams told *The New York Times*. “The genius of the NEA has been that the peer-review panels, made up of local folks, chose art and artists by using criteria based upon quality and excellence, never touching subject matter.”

“He was a tireless and fearless supporter of the arts,” reports John Frohnmayer, who served as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts during that tumultuous era. “He risked his political career in doing so.”

Frohnmayer recalls that Williams “called out the congressional critics of the Endowment for their duplicity and moral posturing.” He also threatened to prevent adjournment of Congress until the Endowment’s Reauthorization Bill was considered, and worked tirelessly to craft language that allowed the Endowment to continue to serve the country.”

“How could one ask for a better champion for the arts?” Frohnmayer asks.

A Butte native, Williams has referred to artists as society’s “canaries in the mines,” pointing to the artist’s ability to portend and depict our condition as a society.

Thanks to the legislator’s monumental efforts to save the NEA, Montana organizations still benefit from direct endowment grants or re-grant funds managed by the Montana Arts Council.

From 1998-2008, more than \$9 million in grant funds have directly benefited Montana. This money serves three out of every five Montana towns, and reaches into every single county.

Missoula resident Sue Talbot, a Governor’s Arts Award recipient and former chairman of the Montana Arts Council who has also been an indefatigable arts advocate, recalls visiting the legislator in Washington, DC.:

“After a few minutes talking about Montana news we would always switch to the subject of the arts in Montana. It was gratifying to know that Pat had a genuine desire to support the arts for everyone ... He believed that state or federal support should supplement individual and corporate donations for the small town art museum and the tour groups who present in rural areas, as well as the larger institutions in major Montana

cities.

“His battles for the National Endowment for the Arts must have been personally taxing, but the reward was a success that has benefited not just Montana but our entire country.”

Williams is an educator by profession and after leaving Congress he resumed his career at The University of Montana where he teaches courses in environmental studies, history and political science, and remains active in several organizations that benefit Montanans. His wife, Carol, is the Minority Leader of the Montana State Senate – the first woman to serve in that position.

David Nelson, the first executive director of the Montana Arts Council, remembers his early treks to the nation’s capital, when he would meet with Sen. Mike Mansfield – also a strong proponent of federal funding for the arts who helped establish the NEA during the Kennedy administration – and his later meetings with Williams.

Nelson predicts, “Mansfield’s role as a creator, Williams’s as defender will be in the history books, with the tag line: ‘It takes uncompromising integrity and courageous leadership to preserve the endowment – much of which was found in Montana.’”

Profile written by Kristi Niemeyer for the Montana Arts Council.